

The Mind's Eye

Volume 5

Number 2

December 1980

NORTH ADAMS STATE COLLEGE

*The Mind's Eye is a journal of review and comment
published four times during the college year
at North Adams, Massachusetts 01247*

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Moral Majority, Inc.

ALTHOUGH the Reverend Jerry Falwell has been at pains not to take credit for the victory of Ronald Reagan, he has nevertheless made the point that his political organization, Moral Majority, Inc., got four million voters to register and stimulated another ten million to vote. Other evangelical organizations did similar work with their members to noticeable effect. A New York Times/CBS News poll found that 61% of white born-again Christians voted for Mr. Reagan as against 34% for Mr. Carter and 4% for Mr. Anderson. The born-again group amounted to 17% of the voters, a large number that some see as only the tip of the iceberg, for evangelicals—of whom there are some 30 million to 65 million—have been traditionally apolitical. If this group could be inspired to go to the polls in great numbers, it would form a powerful voting bloc. This is precisely the object conservative politicians like Howard Phillips and Paul Weyrich had in mind when they persuaded Jerry Falwell to found Moral Majority two years ago.

Getting great numbers of evangelicals to exercise their franchise is not cause for alarm. Quite the opposite. What is disturbing, however, is the narrowness of the evangelical concept of the good society and the mischief that could flow from it.

SO MUCH has been said by and about Jerry Falwell in recent days that it is not entirely clear what Mr. Falwell stands for. Fortunately, he has published a book this year, *Listen, America!* which sets forth his views. He believes that America is at the "brink of death," brought there by a vocal minority of irreligious men and women. And he sees himself in the mold of an Old Testament prophet calling America back to repentance before it is too late.

Listen, America! is a preaching burdened with oversimplifications and gratuitous assertions. Central to its argument is the claim that this nation was founded by "godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation," a theme so frequently repeated in various forms as to be a refrain. With this statement Mr. Falwell expansively ignores three hundred years of thought which preceded the American Revolution. The historical fact is that the American political system was the fruit of the Enlightenment, that complex of eighteenth-century intellectual currents which had its origin in a procession of European philosophers and scientists going as far back as the Italian Renaissance humanists of the fifteenth century and coming forward through Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Newton, Berkeley, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant—the thinkers who made the modern world. What the Founding Fathers created was not a theocracy on the Puritan

model but an open society based on reason and the ideals of progress and human perfectibility, with a government containing checks and balances against human fallibility.

Religion was on the minds of the framers of the constitution as a freedom to be protected but not as an institution to be established to lend the state legitimacy. The *ancien régime*—the traditional organization of society in which the church had played a prominently controlling role—found no place in American polity. When Jerry Falwell cries out for America to return to Holy Writ because that is where it began, he is wide of the mark.

BUT THE insistence of Moral Majority cannot be easily dismissed, and we owe to a certain restiveness when we consider that the conservative trend it represents may yet bring a new era of repressiveness to education. Mr. Falwell observes that "until about thirty years ago . . . Christian education and the precepts of the Bible still permeated the curriculum of public schools." These, Falwell says, have been replaced by courses reflecting the philosophy of humanism, naturalism, and socialism, doctrines which in his view are tantamount to crass materialism, atheism, sexual anarchy, and the abandonment of the free enterprise system—"a far cry from what our Founding Fathers intended education to be." Textbooks are riddled with philosophical error; they should be examined by parents and reformed after the example of the Christian schools, where "in science the student learns God's laws for the universe; in history, God's plan for the ages; and in civics, God's requirement of loyalty and support for the government He has ordained."

What is worrisome about this constricted interpretation of the ills of society is not the danger that free inquiry will be done away with: we trust that the intellectual tradition is too firmly rooted for that to happen. But what may very well occur is the rise of a new McCarthyism to cast a pall over academic freedom. If an extreme brand of conservatism prevails, we may see not only a rash of removal of books from library shelves but, worse, a self-censorship of teachers at all levels of education silenced by the chill of social disapproval. Falwell and company may succeed in releasing a flood of nostalgia for a mythical "pure" America that never was.

Liberty, the real gift of the Founding Fathers, is not to be worn lightly. Nor are the Reverend Jerry Falwell's strictures to be tossed aside as crackpot ideas. If nothing else, they are a sobering reminder that free societies are outnumbered in this world.

—Stephen A. Green & Charles McIsaac

Television Commercials and American Values

by Harris Elder

RONALD McDONALD as the Pied Piper leads his flock through the Golden Arches. The Pat Boones, exuding sincerity on pasty smooth faces, recommend Clearasil for the eradication of unsightly blemishes which undermine teenage sexual opportunities. A chic princess brandishes her Jordache derriere before the camera eye, appealing to the Now Generation of assertive women who shape their own destinies. In a bright and cheerful classroom, prepubescent school children celebrate in dance and song that they, too, can share the pleasures of the Jordache look with teacher. What do we pay for these seemingly innocuous gems of persuasion, television commercials? In a recent poll financed, not surprisingly, by the National Association of Broadcasters, the Roper Organization asked people if they "agree or disagree that having commercials on TV is a fair price for being able to watch it." Accepting the premise that "having commercials" was the only price they were paying, 85 per cent of those polled agreed.

There are, unfortunately, additional costs. The viewer pays for his receiving equipment and the power to operate it. Viewers also subsidize television as consumers of the advertised products. In addition to these considerable expenses, they pay heavily for television programming as taxpayers, for the TV commercial, which is enormously expensive to produce and broadcast, usually qualifies as a deductible business expense. But television commercials subtly exact a much greater fee. Simply because of the sheer numbers of them watched—and enjoyed—year after year by millions of viewers, the commercial spot has made a significant impact on American popular cultural values. Indeed, the problem of defining cultural values generally may hinge on understanding the role of television commercials in their formation and transmission.

ESTIMATES of the size and habits of the television audience suggest the crucial role played by the commercial. From kindergarten through the high school years most children are exposed to approximately 12,000 classroom hours. During the same formative years they may watch as many as 24,000 hours of television. A child's vocabulary development is strongly influenced by catch words and phrases used in commercials; children can often be heard singing

the jingles of fast-food chains, cereal, candy, chewing gum. Their mimesis often influences buying decisions as they recite commercial slogans while mom tows them along at the supermarket. Nor is there evidence that grownups exercise their critical facilities in front of the tube. A Roper report notes that three-fourths of adult viewers usually find commercials "fun to watch." None of this should be surprising, however, since commercials tend to be the most recurrent—and remembered—element in the programming day.

A Federal Trade Commission decision identifying child audiences as "unqualified" to evaluate television commercial advertising is not to be taken as a stamp of approval on their elders' perspicacity. In an

effort to improve its public image, ITT produced a series of children's programs in 1974 and 1975 titled *The Big Blue Marble*, all featuring the slogan "The Best Ideas Are Ideas that Help People." The company simultaneously ran a series of prime-time commercials which publicized *The Big Blue Marble*, all featuring the slogan "The Best Ideas Are Ideas that Help People." The cost of showing the commercials was double the \$4 million it took to

produce the film series, which was provided free to television stations—a contrast in expenditures which suggests that the ostensible message of *The Big Blue Marble* was secondary to ITT's need for a pretext for its public relations effort. And sure enough, a study financed by the corporation found that the ITT "cares about the general public" rating doubled in the twelve-month period during which the commercials were aired. Although most adults are confident about their immunity to gently phrased suggestions such as the ones used by ITT, they would appear no less vulnerable to the dazzle of the commercial message than children.

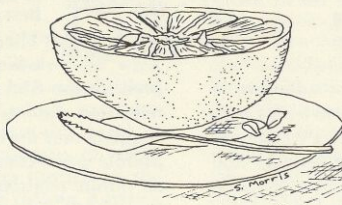
NOT ONLY do they appear with stupefying frequency, but commercials surpass most other television programming with lustrously varnished productions which compel the attention of the average viewer. A business textbook, *The Television Commercial: Creativity and Craftsmanship*, heralds the commercial as "an American art form . . . ahead of most TV programs in being in tune with the United States." TV commercials even enjoy institutional recognition for their aesthetic and persuasive merits.



Out of the 40,000 commercials produced during a typical year, fifty are honored with Clio Awards—named, perhaps ironically, for the muse of history—at the annual American TV Commercials Festival.

The huge cost of producing commercials also reflects their central role in television programming and in the buying habits of American consumers. The budget for a single 30-second spot may run as high as \$200,000. If feature films were produced on this scale, a two-hour movie would cost \$48 million, a figure rivaling even a *Star Wars* budget. And the production costs are only a beginning. The showing of a 30-second commercial in prime time may cost the sponsor as much as \$100,000. Since most commercials are broadcast many times, often simultaneously on three networks, the message may entail multimillion-dollar stakes. Yet so great are the profits generated by television commercials that sponsors clamor for advertising minutes armed with bids which inflate the price of air time to levels incomprehensible to the average viewer. Technology, however, may be used in the near future to alleviate this financial burden. A recent issue of the trade publication *Video Systems* examined the advantages of "time compression," a process that allows audio and video to be played back faster than the rate at which they were originally recorded, without perceptible distortions. The author glowingly reported that time compression could "make commercials even more effective as sales tools by enabling the advertiser to pack a denser message into the same amount of time" and would "eliminate several minutes from the shows to allow for the extra commercials."

WHAT accounts for the cost effectiveness of these miniature slices of life? The television commercial employs a highly compressed audiovisual language which draws upon the resources of other advertising media and multiplies their effectiveness. From the page it uses pictures and print; on the sound track it communicates through the spoken word, which can be voice-over or dramatized but is usually both; natural sounds and music further enhance the tone and impact of the message. In addition, the TV commercial enjoys the advantage of movement in capturing the viewer's interest in a theater of threat



Harris Elder, Assistant Professor of English, has taught courses in film and television and has served as a research/production assistant for Will Rogers' 1920s: A Cowboy Guide to the Times (1977), a compilation film funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

and promise. And not only do camera, people, and products move, these audio and visual components are also skillfully manipulated into a pattern of thematic juxtapositions, insuring that not one second of air time is wasted. Grandma is not simply embarrassed by loose dentures; her grandchildren recoil at her affront with the sights and sounds of innocent disgust. Comes Fix-a-Dent to the rescue, providing a remedy while it also cheers up the lighting and brightens the music on the sound track. And just in case someone has missed the point, a narrator reminds us that the product now seen in close-up is not only responsible for this miracle of applied science but it also available at better stores everywhere. Grandma's problem is identified and solved in a gratifying montage of deftly edited shots, leaving the viewer no opportunity—or desire—for question or review. It is little wonder that the television commercial serves the persuasive needs of its sponsors more readily than other advertising: from each of them it culls the most useful rhetorical strategies and combines them into a tapestry of images more real than life.

AN IRONY of truth-in-advertising legislation is that the requirement to demonstrate the validity of claims encourages sponsors to *avoid* substantive claims. It is safer and ultimately more persuasive to disarm the viewer with a humorous approach, one which makes the commercial pitch seem like no more than a bit of innocent fun. Thus a vacationing American couple relax in a Japanese bath only to be surprised by a Japanese businessman in the same pool who embarrasses them with his undress while he extols the virtues of Citicorp Traveler's Checks. In their well-appointed living room Mariette Hartley and James Garner cozily exchange jokes about amateur photography—but the real business of selling Polaroid cameras goes on at a stratum of communication beneath the surface. Wouldn't only someone with a sour personality object to the playful tone of these engaging vignettes?

On the one hand, industry spokesmen energetically argue that television influences buying habits, fashions, and political choices; they can, of course, be expected to speak in such terms if their network is to command top dollar for commercial time. On the other hand, they deny with equal vigor that the messages coming through the tube play a part in the way we make a range of other decisions. In the typical TV commercial formula, the viewer is shown a problem and treated to a quick and easy solution—which not accidentally hinges on the purchase and consumption of a product. Scope mouthwash improves one's social life, Yamaha motorcycles cure

midsummer ennui, and Alka-Seltzer functions as a dating service, uniting lonely singles on the basis of shared gastronomical problems. These minidramas of problem and solution carry over to other programming as well. Not only must the hour-long drama restructure life within its allocated time slot, it must accommodate periodic commercial breaks. To capture and hold the viewer's attention, to keep his fickle hand off the dial, to make him apprehensive enough to heed the commercial message, programs are structured according to a series of climaxes reached in *medias res*. Left in a state of tension and uncertainty, the viewer gets slipped a commercial mickey which by its positioning carries the aura of a solution, lulls him into a false sense of security. If only life's problems could be so easily gargled away.

GENE YOUNGBLOOD writes in *Expanded Cinema* that "we literally live and breathe in a 'mediatmosphere,' and we have accepted nonchalantly this phenomenon without really perceiving it because it is part of our environment." As the accumulated messages of thousands of television commercials blend into the audiovisual landscape, our perception of how we should live is affected in an almost insidious way through the construction of a national value system. Although this technological leviathan does not explicitly articulate these values, viewers tend to accept the authority of the persistently glowing screen as a reflection of the world as it is and should be, as the voice of how we can achieve what is important and desirable.

Perhaps Edith Bunker best captured the essence of the relationship between television commercials and American values in an early episode of *All in the Family*. Daughter Gloria had been describing the emotional problems besetting one of her friends. With a look of concern, Edith wondered if the experience was "as bad as the 'heartbreak of psoriasis,'" a slogan used in Tegrin Shampoo commercials. No reasonable person would argue that life can be reduced to easy phrases (no one argues in prime time that it cannot) but with accumulated hours of slogans the composite message is subtly implanted in the viewer's mind. And since many problems are only partly solvable, it is all too easy to slide into the commercial jingle for an answer. Will Stove Top Stuffing reunite a lethargic family at the dinner table? Does ring-around-the-collar pose a major threat to otherwise happy marriages? Will drinking Pepsi-Cola transport freezing New Englanders to sunny California beaches where they will join members of the surfing generation? Can Geritol sweep away the uncertainties of a midlife crisis? Are Life Savers "a part of living"? While the ostensible messages of these commercials do not overtly advance these kinds of propositions, the underlying equation of product

Teacher

by Charles McIsaac

To be a teacher
is every day to risk
the challenge of a child's imagination
and follow him into unknown country,
the while you fear
not coming out alive,
for you might kill yourself dead
by blunting his quest
with grownup ignorance.

consumption and happiness lurks beneath the glittering surface, barely noticed on the conscious level. After all, aren't these commercials designed to sell products, not a way of life?

The catch is that the sponsor must do both if he is to prosper in the competitive arena of the public airways. Rapid growth in mass production over the past century has made advertising more crucial to business success. An increasing saturation of the marketplace by goods and services has necessitated the manufacture of new demand for new products. As the most efficient vehicle for reaching the masses, television commercials, in the tradition of other advertising media, have successfully addressed a problem which seems endemic to technological society. The more products that have been sold, the tougher it is to increase consumption to make room for additional new products so that consumption can increase, and so on and on. Solution? Peddle the unneeded as necessities using emotional, value-oriented persuasion. Since it is not often feasible to sell products directly, then sell a way of life predicated on the consumption of products. When Jamie's parents recommend Luv disposable diapers, the commercial succeeds less because of the product's form-fitting, leakproof design than because of the homey family atmosphere permeating the scene. While there's obviously nothing wrong with showing the family in a positive light, one would be hard pressed to demonstrate that Luv diapers promote marital harmony. Television did not create the consumption ethic, however; TV simply serves as the latest—and by far the most pervasive—mouthpiece of the American Dream.

ONE MAJOR component of the dream is free choice in politics. As the drama of the Republican and Democratic National Conventions unfolded, somewhat slowly, on television this summer, much attention focused on party platforms. What stand would each party take on the Equal Rights Amendment,

inflation, unemployment, abortion? The hoopla over these issues may have obscured a third platform, the corporate one, which was curiously identical for each political party. We were told that if the arts are flourishing in America, some of the thanks for their financial support should go to Ma Bell. If technology can rescue America from its past folly in energy and ecology, a beautifully animated commercial in a style reminiscent of 1930s mural art tells us that the beneficent Sinclair Oil Corporation has reached into its roots in the American pioneer tradition to avert yet another threat to the environment and to future supplies of energy.

These messages were not intended to inspire consumers to install additional telephones or buy more

gasoline. Corporations need to shape their public image just as politicians do. Along with the more mundane ads for deodorant and beer, these corporations penetrated and assumed a role in the American political process. An executive in a major oil company remarked to me that there was nothing at all improper about this corporate strategy, they were "just acting like politicians." The rub is that they are neither politicians nor a legitimate part of the political process at the convention. But just as consumers are encouraged to perceive products as "a part of living," so does this corporate image become a new operative reality—and dangers lurk there of a further distortion of values which we many now only dimly imagine.

Ellen Schiff on Television Drama

Looking over the Score: A Review of Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time*

ARTHUR MILLER'S *Playing for Time*, telecast by CBS during three hours of prime time on September 30, arrives among the recent entries in the now impressive body of Holocaust drama. *Playing for Time* is not Miller's first work on this subject. This TV dramatization of the memoirs of Fania Fénelon, French nightclub singer and Auschwitz survivor, bears striking resemblances to Miller's 1964 stage play *Incident at Vichy*, which he based on an actual episode of deliberately switched identities. Without reading Fénelon's book, it is impossible to know if the playwright's imagination invented as freely here as it did in the earlier script. Less problematic and, for this reviewer, far more consequential is Miller's incisive delineation in both works of some of the psychological phenomena invariably attested to by those who try to describe their experiences during that accursed era. There is an unmistakable ring of authenticity to Miller's depiction of the guilt, the self-reproach, the relentlessness of fear, and the capitulation of abstract nobility to the brute necessity of living each hour wisely. Perhaps most insidious of all, there is the crisis of identity—the genuine shock felt by innumerable Jews, most especially the nationalistic, the long assimilated, and the indifferent, suddenly forced to regard themselves exclusively as Jews and hence (that such "logic" could be regarded as apodictic remains a bewilderment) as dispensable *untersmenschen*.

Ellen Schiff, Professor of French and Comparative Literature, is a student of contemporary drama as well as of the literature of the Holocaust.

The measure of Miller's fidelity to psychological truth is the first of two factors which insure the considerable success of *Playing for Time*. The second is the focus he adopts for viewing historical truth. Almost four decades of Holocaust art have demonstrated that the only way to approach this colossal and grotesque subject is on the oblique. Straightforward attempts at graphic recreation inevitably fail. Art is utterly incompatible with such staggering literalness. It is hardly surprising then that the least successful scenes in *Playing for Time* are precisely those which try for direct representation: the chimneys belching human smoke, the furiously burning fires, the mob scenes in the train bound for the camp.

FORTUNATELY, these pitifully contrived scenes are counterbalanced by others which work splendidly by virtue of a suggestiveness that lures the viewer to synthesize what he is seeing with what he already knows. For example, one of the most poignant sequences in *Playing for Time* occurs just after Fania's arrival at Auschwitz, when she and some of the other new arrivals are stripped and shorn. The unremitting efficiency with which they are humiliated and depersonalized serves to underscore the finality of their imprisonment. But this scene simultaneously accomplishes much more. It jolts to memory those well-popularized photos of the incredible masses of human hair stockpiled by the Nazis. As spectators, we are drawn into the drama, aware that the shaved, tormented women we see before us are two among millions, alert to the fate we know they face. And yet, quite improbably, the shearing scene

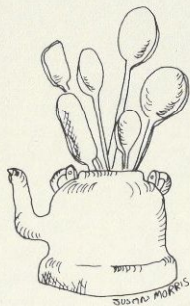
has a certain heartbreaking and ghastly beauty. The curls and braids cascading to the floor do nothing to muffle the persistent clashing of scissors or to mute the unmistakable sound of torture nearby. Most touching, the entire sequence is played out in dappled sunlight that streams through the windows. It is the last sunlight we see, but hardly the last windows.

The window offers an especially effective optic for the portrayal of camp life. Episode after episode taking place within the barracks used by the female orchestra is shot against a window, permitting the viewer some perception of what is simultaneously going on outside. The fleeting images of slave labor details, of trucks with their human freight, of prisoners quite literally being herded to fresh or final miseries combine with the audio background of guttural commands, gun butts striking human flesh, and screams and sobbing. Because the overwhelming sights and sounds of Auschwitz are introduced in this subtle way, the viewer is led to understand that the choice made by the female musicians who agree to play for the barbarians is their only alternative, however fragile, to being swallowed immediately by the world just outside the window. That degree of comprehension is no mean achievement for *Playing for Time*. One of the thorniest problems encountered both by survivors who would describe the deportations and the ensuing horrors and by those who would understand them is the outrageous improbability of many kinds of human behavior which, once removed from the context of *l'univers concentrationnaire*, become all but incomprehensible. The windows in Miller's play furnish a perspective essential to apprehending the thing *in situ*.

The same windows serve admirably in the characterizations. Not all the women inside the barracks see the same thing when they look out. At one extreme is the fierce little Zionist in whose mind Auschwitz has been transformed to a desert on the way to the Promised Land. Fania faults her for remaining detached and too pure, an accusation whose accuracy reveals almost as much about Fania as about the Zionist. A woman who professes no ideology, who says, "I have no answers. I am living from minute to minute," Fania is incapable of understanding that the woman whose entire existence is now devoted to anticipating a Jewish life in a Jewish land finds therein the strength to endure Auschwitz. Indeed, one of the most meticulously fabricated defense mechanisms worked out by concentration camp internees involved their becoming the psychological inhabitants of a land beyond their physical reach.

A VERY different attitude toward the prospects seen from the window is that of Alma Rosé, niece of

Gustave Mahler and martinet conductor of the Auschwitz female orchestra. Alma does not fail to see out the window; she *refuses* to see, and counsels Fania to follow her example. "In this place," Alma explains, "you will have to concentrate on creating all the beauty you are capable of creating." This line of reasoning allows Alma to lead the orchestra in a humorous Jewish folk song calculated to calm prisoners during the initial selections for the gas, to select music designed to appeal to the camp chieftains, including the infamous Dr. Mengele, and to browbeat her inmate instrumentalists into achieving her standards of excellence. What almost saves Alma is her unshakable self-esteem. It is the very naiveté of her belief that genuine regard for artists still exists that finally dooms her. Jane Alexander is magnificent in the role of this Viennese musician who never recovers from the astonishment of being called to account for her Jewish identity.



Fania does not heed Alma's advice to ignore the window. She looks out often, and she is revolted. Once as she turns away, horrified at having witnessed children being torn from their mothers, she is chided by a fellow inmate. He tells her she *must* look and see everything, "so you can tell them when it's over." Fania protests, "But I don't believe. Why do you pick me?" The prisoner, a quasi-mystical character, responds that he can always tell who's going to live. Indeed, it takes no great perception to see from the first that Fania Fénelon, especially as played by the regal Vanessa Redgrave, is special. She is a glamorous and accomplished artiste, whose charm and generosity of spirit make her a natural leader. However, while these attributes go far to endear her to her fellow inmates and, of course, to television audiences conditioned to expect the best from the tallest and most beautiful, they do nothing to explain how Fania Fénelon survived Auschwitz. Even Redgrave's vigorous and nuanced performance fails to fill in the obvious gaps. One of the prisoners remarks that Fania has no identity, and that seems a fair summary of what the play says about her. In the hair-shearing scene Fania objects to a Nazi that she's not Jew crap, she's French. Shortly after being liberated, Fania is, improbably, interviewed by the press and, in a cracked voice, sings a few triumphant bars of "La Marseillaise." Yet, in between, she does not stay afloat by holding fast to her French identity as, say, Alma does to hers as artist. Curiously, when the monstrous Dr. Mengele compliments her on her singing, Fénelon, choked with the offensiveness of the circumstances, impetuously blurts out that her name is not really Fénelon, but Goldstein. However, later, she furiously retorts to a fellow inmate's scolding, "I'm sick of the Jews and the Gentiles, the easterners

and the westerners, the Germans and the French. I'm a woman, not a tribe, and I've been humiliated. That's all I know."

IF FANIA FÉNELON had any special talent that stood her in good stead at Auschwitz, it was perhaps her unyielding pragmatism. She understood the hopelessness of the entire situation, and her lack of illusions convinced her of the need to live from minute to minute. But the play attributes to her a degree of lucidity about the implications of the Holocaust as she is still in the very thick of it that is very difficult to credit. No matter, the device permits the playwright to put in Fania's mouth some wonderful lines, like her compassion for another prisoner who believes herself totally innocent ("After the war, she'll have nobody to talk to in all Europe") and her observation about the Nazi commandant of the women prisoners ("What disgusts me is that a woman who is beautiful can be doing such things. We're of the same species. That's exactly what's so hopeless about the whole thing.").

The persona of Fania Fénelon emerges from *Playing for Time* bigger and emptier than life in a way this viewer tends to associate with television in general. *Playing for Time* works well as long as it operates within the constraints imposed by its medium. Large-scale scenes can be suggested effectively, as we have seen, when the television screen itself functions as a window on a larger world. But, at the other end of the scale, subtleties and innuendoes do not televise well—at least in this production. In short, this reviewer suspects there is more to Fania Fénelon than met her eye.

In addition to the essence of the heroine, the play leaves unexplained and unintegrated other no doubt relevant material. For instance, exactly what are we to make of Fania's entertaining the Auschwitz top command, at one of the most exalted moments in the play, with Puccini's "Un Bel Di"? Why is the aria sung in English, since certainly both the Nazis, who ostensibly requested it, and Fania, who performs it, would know it in the original? Is the translation used to be certain that American audiences will understand the words? All right then, what is one to make of the patent references in the aria to the heroine's

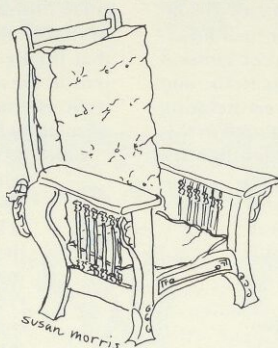
redemption by the American military? The obvious conclusion—that the Nazis are somehow unaware of the ironies of Cio Cio San's song—does not jibe at all with the sincere conviction with which they tell Fania that her singing "is a consolation that feeds the spirit [and] strengthens us for this difficult work of ours."

OCCASIONALLY, the achievement of producer Linda Yellin (whose parents survived the Holocaust), director Daniel Mann, and cinematographer Arthur Ornitz far exceeds the script. There are some egregious errors in the playwright's judgment. A few scenes are so woodenly contrived that they trivialize the account and seriously undermine its authority as a real survivor's memoir. Many of these are barracks scenes where the women's behavior is far more appropriate to a sorority slumber party than to a concentration camp. In the worst of these, there is actually a songfest around a piano, complete with "Stormy Weather" (how inadvertently mocking the lyric "Don't know why/there's no sun up in the sky..."). What makes these episodes even more objectionable is that they unnecessarily lengthen a

script that instead needs judicious pruning—it could easily tell the burden of its tale in two hours instead of three.

However, even with reservations, this writer hails *Playing for Time* as an event of consequence. Its importance is undiminished by the ugly contradiction between Redgrave's political convictions and the role she played. That controversy can, of course, be argued with earnest conviction, but only at the expense of distracting from the issue at hand—the responsible dramatization of an event at Auschwitz. Similarly, the importance of the program offsets the obvious shortcomings inherent in mounting this kind of play not only on television, but on commercial television to boot. Having seen again and again the show's title frame in which two pairs of hands are clasped, with the tattooed concentration camp numbers on one forearm conspicuously displayed, the viewer can only be bemused to learn in the commercial intervals of a cosmetic cream which will erase skin markings, like freckles and age spots.

What is most significant about the telecast *Playing for Time* is the evidence it provides that American artists and American audiences are trying to fathom that awesome phenomenon known as Auschwitz. *Playing for Time* is an eloquent statement of the conviction that, as another Arthur Miller character once put it, "Attention, attention must finally be paid."



Stephen A. Green, Chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, is a member of the editorial board of *The Mind's Eye*.

The drawings in this issue are by Susan Morris of East Dover, Vermont.